

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

6 August 2005

South Korean pilots' strike enters third week

More than 370 pilots employed by Asiana Airlines, South Korea's second largest airliner, are continuing strike action begun on July 17, after negotiations over working conditions and job security collapsed.

Domestic and cargo flights have come to a standstill and international flights have been restricted. It has been estimated the company lost 187 billion won (\$US184 million) up to July 31.

Asiana employs 826 pilots, of whom 516 are union members. The union is demanding a cut in flight hours and an increase in the retirement age from 55 to 58. It is also demanding a five-day workweek and maternity leave benefits.

Railway workers protest in India

Andhra Pradesh railway workers demonstrated in several cities on July 27 over delays in the implementation of a new wage and conditions contract and against government moves toward privatisation. They also demanded that all current staff vacancies be filled. Railway staff from Bangalore and outlying towns, such as Kirandul and Koraput, rallied near the main city station.

Textile and government workers protest over conditions in Tamilnadu

Textile workers in Tamilnadu launched a state-wide industrial campaign on July 27 to demand improved wages, an end to contract employment, re-opening of closed mills and compensation for laid-off workers, and equal pay and conditions for women employees.

Police arrested hundreds of workers attempting to establish pickets outside factories in Namansamudram, Padukottai, Tiruchi, Salem, Namakkal and Theni. In Didungal, some 350 mill workers demonstrated outside the local government office.

Railway workers, as well as government employees from the tax department and postal service, protested the same day in Coimbatore to demand a 1,000-rupee monthly pay rise (\$US20) and other benefits.

Nepalese civil servants defy ban on unions

Some 400 civil servants took to the streets of Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, on July 22 to protest against a proclamation by King Gyanendra banning unions in government offices. The workers represented 38 unions and professional associations with a combined membership of over 300,000.

Large numbers of riot police were deployed against the small demonstration and confiscated banners and posters being carried by the unionists. "We have chalked out a month-long protest program against the government's decision to ban all professional organisations and to protect our civil and human rights," the Nepal Government Employees Organisation chairman told the press.

Sri Lankan government workers protest over conditions

Technical officers employed by the Export Agriculture Department, the Animal Husbandry Department and the Colombo Municipal Council picketed the Department of Public Administration in Colombo on July 28 to demand an end to salary anomalies between workers at different departments. After the protest, the workers marched to the National Council of Administration. On August 1, Inland Revenue Department employees picketed their workplaces, demanding improved promotion opportunities.

Power workers demand outstanding salaries

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers picketed company offices on August 3 to demand payment of outstanding salaries and an immediate pay rise. They have given the CEB one month to fulfill their demands or face an indefinite strike.

Glass workers protest job cuts

Workers at Pilkington glass plants in Victoria walked out on August 3, after General Motors Holden (GMH) announced it would import car windscreens from Thailand instead of maintaining local contracts. The decision puts a question mark over at least 280 jobs.

Workers rallied outside GMH offices in Port Melbourne where Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) national secretary Greg Combet blamed a recent free trade agreement with Thailand for the loss of jobs.

Over the past 14 months, however, about 1,500 jobs have been lost in the car industry, and thousands more have gone in previous years. The unions have not conducted any campaign to defend these jobs but attempted to convince workers to accept worse conditions in order to make local production more profitable.

Radio New Zealand staff stop work

Radio New Zealand (RNZ) staff stopped work on July 29 to consider their response to a breakdown in pay talks. The walkout prevented the main afternoon news review program

“Checkpoint” from going to air.

While RNZ has offered a 3 percent wage rise, workers want 5 percent and a one-week increase in annual leave. The Public Service Association (PSA) which represents many RNZ employees, including journalists, librarians, technicians, administration and clerical workers, and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) have attempted to negotiate a new collective employment agreement over the past three months.

A PSA spokesman said RNZ salaries were lower than other public and commercial broadcasters. While there have been pay increases in the past two years, this followed a decade of cutbacks and minimal wage movement. EPMU spokeswoman Rosalie Webster said the unions hoped the strike action would lead to “further talks” with RNZ management.

A further strike was held on August 1. The flagship current affairs program “Morning Report” was not broadcast on Monday and about 30 staff picketed RNZ’s central Wellington office. Management replaced the program with four hours of live feed from the BBC. National Union of Journalists members at the BBC condemned the RNZ’s actions as strikebreaking.

Canterbury health workers to strike

Six hundred staff employed by the Canterbury District Health Board, in New Zealand’s South Island, voted this week to strike for five days unless a new pay deal can be reached by August 10. The workers want a 30 percent pay catch-up for all health workers.

A spokeswoman said the five-day strike would be a last resort after nine months of petitions to parliament, rallies, lobbying and letters. She said health workers could not look after others in the community when they did not earn enough to look after their own families. Workers voted for strike action by an 80 percent majority.

Auckland baggage handlers strike over wages

About 80 Menzies Aviation workers in Auckland went on strike from midnight until 6 a.m. on August 1. The workers provide baggage handling and cleaning services to international airlines, including Emirates, Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, Garuda and Pacific Blue. They have not had a pay rise in two years.

An Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union spokesman said the workers are paid well below the market rate, with some earning as little as \$12.50 an hour. The union wants skilled baggage handlers to be paid \$37,500 a year, not the \$32,000 the company is offering.

Auckland manufacturing workers walk out

About 50 nightshift staff at Irwin Industrial Tools in Wellsford, north of Auckland, downed tools at 3a.m. on August 2 over an unacceptable pay offer. The workers later attended a stopwork meeting where about 70 day shift employees voted to join the strike.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) had sought a 5 percent pay rise. The company offered 4 percent

this year, with another 3 percent next year, but this did not include a proposed cut in allowances. In reality, the offer amounted to an increase of just 2.5 percent.

In a separate dispute, 87 process workers employed by American meat-snack maker Jack Links struck for several hours on August 2 over pay. The workers, who earn \$12.50 an hour, have not had a pay rise in three years. The company has rejected EPMU submissions for a 5 percent rise.

PNG Telekom workers still on strike

The three-week national strike by Papua New Guinea Telekom employees is provoking management concern as communications breakdowns begin to affect revenue and banking transactions. After several major breakdowns, Telekom called on the PNG government to declare the strike illegal and threatened to accuse the strikers of sabotage. Under the Telecommunications Act of 1996, individual workers could be fined 20,000 kina (US\$6,330) and jailed for 15 years.

Telekom employees walked out on July 14 after management refused to pay a 4 percent wage rise due on July 1. Telekom promised to pay rise after July 31 when an independent audit was expected to confirm that company profits could sustain the increase. Workers are still awaiting announcement of the audit result.

Fijian municipal workers strike for pay rise

National Union of Municipal Workers struck on July 3 to demand payment of a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) agreed by the Suva City Council (SCC) in late 2003. While the SCC had paid most of the agreement, a 1.5- percent additional entitlement, backdated to December 23, 2003, was still outstanding. SCC officers rushed to the strike scene with the COLA payments within hours of the walkout.

Tonga public service strike in second week

Over 3,000 Tonga public servants are continuing strike action after rejecting a 12.5 percent salary increase from the government on July 29. The union wants the government to scrap proposed pay rises that will widen the gap between the highest and lowest paid officers. The lowest paid officers currently earn 2,600 paanga (\$US1,336) while government ministers receive 100,000 paanga. The union is seeking increases of up to 80 percent for lowly paid officers.

The Deputy Secretary to Cabinet, Paula Ma’u, said the government would stand firm on its current offer and intends to cut the total public service wage bill by 57 percent through wholesale job cuts.



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